

English Today, 1997, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp.52-56.

Print ISSN: 0266-0784 Electronic ISSN: 1474-0567

doi: 10.1017/S026607840000986X

<http://journals.cambridge.org/>

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=ENG>

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=2252992&jid=&volumeId=&issueId=&aid=1448844>

© 1997 Cambridge University Press. All rights reserved.

English in Sierra Leone

MIRIAM CONTEH-MORGAN

MIRIAM CONTEH-MORGAN, formerly Assistant Lecturer in Linguistics and tutor in English at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, has a B.A. and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education from the same institution and an M.A. in Linguistics and English Language Teaching from Leeds University. She has also taught in secondary schools in Freetown and was an examiner in English for the West African Examinations Council. Currently, she lives in Columbus, Ohio, USA where she teaches English as a Second Language at Franklin University and African Literature at Ohio State University.

A description of the language as used in this West African country and a consideration of its status there

MUCH HAS been written on the emerging "home-grown" varieties of English across the world: varieties differently described as "New Englishes" (Platt *et al.*, 1984), "Localised Forms of English" (Strevens, 1982) or "Institutionalised Varieties" (Kachru, 1982). While the earlier thrust of these studies was on regional types like West African or Asian English, recent works have tended to concentrate on country-specific ones. Thus Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Cameroonian Englishes, all West African, have each received sustained attention (See for example Jibril, 1982; Sey, 1973; Todd, 1982).

"English in Sierra Leone" or "Sierra Leone English"?

Not all countries in the West African region have been so well served; Sierra Leone is one such. So few studies have been devoted to the English-language situation in that country (Berry, 1961; Fyle, 1975; Pemagbi, 1989) that, compared with the countries listed above, Sierra Leone could be said to constitute one of the "relatively blank areas on the map of English sociolinguistic research" in Africa (Schmeid, 1991).

There are two possible reasons for the dearth of investigations into English in Sierra Leone, especially by local scholars.

The first is the perception by many educated Sierra Leoneans - in my view erroneous - that English is not a foreign language, a perception that may be linked to the social history of the country [See Panel 1]. The early modern intellectual and social elite of Sierra Leone, it will be recalled, was made up of returned freed slaves from Britain and North America. Viewing themselves as "Black Englishmen", as those from England did "speak English well" (Jones, 1971, quoting Maras), these returnees saw the language as their own. This proprietary attitude was reinforced by the fact that the early settlers in and around Freetown did not have an African language. The belief that English is their native language is still largely held by some of their descendants, known as Krios, despite the changed sociolinguistic patterns of language contact

and change. Many other Sierra Leoneans have also been socialised into not seeing English as non-native. [For the Creole called *Krio*, see Panel 2.]

The implication of this viewpoint on English pedagogy in Sierra Leone is enormous. If the language is perceived as native, teaching approaches and methods would certainly assume a native-speaker type teaching/learning situation. They would in other words pay little or no attention to the multilingual reality of Sierra Leone and the impact of its indigenous languages on English. The result has been that uses of English displaying elements of Sierra Leonean languages have been generally viewed as substandard or deviant, the norm here being the "Queen's English".

A second possible reason for the slow pace of a discussion of, and an investigation into, the use and role of English in Sierra Leone may be that there is no vibrant tradition of imaginative writing in English whose practitioners would have had to deal with the challenges of how to depict indigenous realities: writers who, like the Nigerian Chinua Achebe (1965), would think that English must be "altered to suit its new African surroundings".

But irrespective of perceptions which Sierra Leoneans might have in relation to English, it has become clear to many linguists and language educators that the language as used in Sierra Leone exhibits certain patterns which are becoming entrenched, setting it aside from Standard British and other varieties. This makes it impossible for the phenomenon to continue to be ignored. Pemagbi (1989) accurately points out the ways in which English has risen to the challenge of acculturation by reflecting new concepts, words and institutions. Indeed, a language that can shift, expand and modify itself in the wake of contact is trying to cope with the new demands it encounters.

The study of "English in Sierra Leone" is therefore very necessary. I use this particular expression because, while there may be some acculturation, the features displayed do not in my opinion add up to what could be called "Sierra Leonean English", and it is therefore still premature to name it so. The notion of a Sierra Leonean English presupposes a variety that has come into its own, with *ossified* forms which can be considered standard, the target variety to be learned. Such is not the situation yet in Sierra Leone. What is actually happening is that an as yet unstable form, which cannot logically be a standard, is emerging through a nativisation process and which may eventually issue into a distinct national variety. Until the norms of acceptability and correctness are worked out from within the country and the functions and range of uses fall in place, the term cannot be truly meaningful. At this point, English in Sierra Leone would therefore be a more apt description, and it is to a consideration of this emerging variety that I will now turn.

In the discussion, a profile of language users will be established, based largely on Banjo's typology of Nigerian speakers (1971) and the Kachru model (1986) for Indian English, to describe the usage and lects of English in Sierra Leone.

Establishing a typology

When discussing the non-native varieties of a language, it would be pertinent to include other issues like the users of the language, the methods of its acquisition, and the scope of its use. Since English is a learned language in Sierra Leone, it is accessible almost exclusively to people who go through a western-type education, about 10% of the population (Johnson, 1986), and because of the multilingual nature of the country, it is an additional language to the majority of its speakers. Also, being a learned language, the ability to master the target variety may depend

on factors like how far in the education process the learner goes.

In an idealised situation, one would expect university graduates to have greater facility in English. But because of certain variables, it is not always possible to arrive at such conclusions. Ranges of English are therefore clearly observable and speakers of English in Sierra Leone can be said to oscillate on a cline of performances. Consequently, the boundaries of speakers' abilities are unstable, depending on educational or social variables and/or idiosyncrasies. Therefore, the prescriptivist view that speakers there face only two options (of being perfectly "correct" or intolerably "wrong") would be irrelevant. An English language continuum would reveal a cline ranging from the most to the least acceptable usage, not from the acceptable to the unacceptable, as Greenbaum (1977:5-6) suggests. This would in turn reduce the need for erecting rigid boundaries of speakers' competence and performance.

However, deciding acceptability in language is not always easy. Proof of this is provided in the ambiguities of the West African Examinations Council, the regional examining board of school exit examinations, in relation to its then Ordinary Level English paper. While the Council recommends acceptance of "familiar collocations which have passed into everyday usage in West African speech and writing", like *motor park*, it finds it "extremely hard to define with any degree of exactitude" the lexis required for the production test. Also, the idea that such collocations are acceptable in all the countries is itself erroneous because for example, the Nigerian expression *to school* ('to attend school') is not familiar usage in Sierra Leone and may well be deemed unacceptable there.

The Council's position is even less clear when it comes to phonology. Although the reality is that not many people use Standard British (RP) phonemes, particularly its vowels, the recommended texts for the Oral English examination are the canonical *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of English* by Gimson and *A Dictionary of English Pronunciation* by Daniel Jones.

So a possible typology of the range of Englishes can be established which may in turn inform the likely parameters of acceptability. We will distinguish three types and the examples of usage given after each are authentic, taken either from papers graded for the primary school-leaving examination, university-level essays, or heard spoken at different times.

Type 1: The basilect

At the lower end of the continuum, strikingly characterised by the phonological, syntactic and lexical features of the users' first language, and largely unintelligible outside the geographical limits of that L1. Such speakers tend to translate, limiting in this way the comprehensibility of the variety to speakers of other language backgrounds.

Two samples of such speech, both from native speakers of Mende, are:

- *Whē* I wake up in *di mornin*, I wash my *eyes* (When I wake up in the morning, I wash my face).
- I came with a big run (I came rushing).

If one tried to correlate this basilect with an educational level, it would be discovered that the users would be mainly those who might not have had more than primary-school education: a minimum of seven years of English instruction but, as Schmeid (1991) suggests, usually around ten years.

Type 2: The mesolect

Speakers whose English may not have syntactic or lexical features closely related to their L1, but does display its strong phonological influence. In terms of educational achievement, this group may have had about three more years of formal English training than Type 1 speakers.

Examples of usage in this category are:

- Look at your *ia* on your *ed* (Just look at your hair on your head).
- The *shame* thing happened last time (The same thing happened the last time).

The first sentence has phonological features of Krio and the second was produced by a native Temne speaker.

Type 3: The acrolect

The variety closest to Standard British in syntax and lexis, yet marked by phonological/phonetic differences. If the endonorms decided upon can reach an accommodation with the "new" phonemes, this type could serve as the target to be learned in Sierra Leonean schools.

Its idealised speakers are those who have attained post-secondary education and likely to use such sentences as:

- I always start my classes on the *awa* (I always start my classes on the hour).
- Meet my wife and *chidrē* (Meet my wife and children).

Type 4: Quasi-British English

The typology could be stretched even further to incorporate a fourth level, characterised by closeness to Standard British in phonology, syntax and semantics, but with differences in phonetic features and discursal strategies. Its users are identified not so much for level of education as social status. They may belong to a higher socio-economic group, have gone through a privileged school system where greater attention is often paid to Standard British patterns, and most likely have a more sustained use of English both in the home and at school.

An example of such usage is:

- 'Will 'you 'lend 'me 'a 'pen?

This example shows syllable isochronicity (syllable-timed rhythm) which, though present in all the types discussed above, may be more noticeable in this variety because it is much closer to Standard British (which has a stressed-timed rhythm). In fact, this could also be described as an "inter-African" variety because there seem to be great similarities between Sierra Leonean speakers of this variety and other Africans with similar social backgrounds.

In terms of the viability of this variety as the standard in Sierra Leone, there could well be problems with its general acceptability because its current users are viewed by some as *shuen-shuen* (acting uppity) and not truly representative of the majority of English speakers in the country. If however, the four types are acceptable, then Types Two and Three could be the lower and higher mesolects respectively; if three, then only Type Two would be the mesolect.

Conclusion

Now that there is a more general acceptance of the fact that English is an L2 in Sierra Leone, the question that then arises is where to go from there. Decisions will have to be made on usages like *eating money* (spending money) that are beginning to appear in the print media, on the restrictiveness of *abroad* meaning beyond the continent of Africa, or making *bird* homophonous with *bad*. As barometers of standard use in many developed countries, the broadcast media which use English eighty percent of the time (Fyle, 1976) and the print media which do so exclusively, must have a similar responsibility to Sierra Leoneans. Otherwise, they run the risk of having their practitioners accused of "mutilating the Queen's English", a frequently expressed opinion.

The term "Sierra Leonean English" may or may not be relevant, depending on how actively the matter is debated and what the outcomes of such debates will be. Until then, the term "English in Sierra Leone" seems a more apt description.

Panel 1:

SIERRA LEONE. Officially *Republic of Sierra Leone*. A country of West Africa and member of the Commonwealth. Population: 3.95m (1988), 5.4m (projection for 2000). Ethnicity: 34% Mende; the remainder including Temne, Kono, Fulani, Bullom, Koranko, Limba, Loko, Kissi, and Krios. Religions: 70% traditional, 25% Muslim, 5% Christian. Languages: English (official); Krio (an English-based Creole), Mende, and Temne widely spoken. Education: primary 58%, secondary 17%, tertiary 1%, literacy 30%. The first Europeans to visit the area were Portuguese navigators and British slavers. In the 1780s, British philanthropists bought land from local chiefs to establish settlements for freed slaves, whence the name *Freetown*. In 1808, the coastal settlements became a British colony, and in 1896 the hinterland became a protectorate. Sierra Leone became independent in 1961 and a republic in 1971. The English of Sierra Leone is a variety of West African English; it is distinct from Krio, but the two shade into each other and into vernacular usage. English is the language of all education, all newspapers and magazines, 95% of television and cinema, and the medium for documenting local history and culture. It has such a high status that 'using an African language at a wedding reception or even a private party is unheard of, because it is considered a debasement of the value of the occasion' (Joe Pemagbi, 'Still a Deficient Language?—The New English of Sierra Leone', *English Today* 17, Jan. 1989). Its distinctive vocabulary includes: (1) Words derived from local languages: *agidi* a paste made from fermented cornflour, *bondo* a secret society for women, *fufu* grated and fermented cassava cooked into a paste and eaten with soup or sauce, *woreh* a cattle ranch. (2) Extensions of sense: *apprentice* a young man who loads and unloads vehicles, *bluff* to be elegantly dressed, to have a neat appearance ('She's bluffing today'), *cookery* cheap food eaten outside the home, *foolish* to make (someone) appear stupid ('The teacher was foolished'), *woman damage* money paid to a husband by another man as compensation for having a sexual relationship with his wife. See AFRICAN ENGLISH, ENGLISH, KRIO, LIBERIA, WEST AFRICAN ENGLISH, VARIETY.

(From *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992)

Panel 2:

KRIO , also Creole [Mid-20c: an adaptation of *creole*. Compare CREOLE, KRIOL]. An English Creole spoken in Sierra Leone, which developed when freed slaves were transported from Britain and Nova Scotia to Freetown in 1787 and 1792. The Krios were Christian, often literate, and valued as teachers and clerks along the entire West African coast. Sizeable settlements were established in Gambia, Nigeria, Cameroon, and smaller settlements in Liberia and Ghana, and Krio had an influence on all West African pidgins and Creoles, with the possible exception of *Merico* in Liberia. Krio is spoken as a mother tongue by some 250,000 people in and around Freetown and by many more Sierra Leoneans as a second language. It has a dictionary (*A Krio-English Dictionary*, ed. C. N. Fyle & Eldred Jones), and is probably the only standardized West African Creole. It has been used for translating Shakespeare and parts of the Bible, and for plays, poems, and prose.

Features. (1) *Pronunciation*. Krio is non-rhotic, syllable-timed, and a tone language. It has seven monophthongs, /i, e, ɛ, a, ɔ, o, u/ and three diphthongs /ai, au, oi/. All vowels can be nasalized. Tone is significant, distinguishing grammatical as well as lexical meaning: for example, a customary low tone for auxiliaries becomes high for purposes of emphasis. (2) *Grammar*. There is little morphological variation, time and aspect being carried by pre-verbal auxiliaries, and plurality in the noun is either assumed or marked by *dem*: *I bin kil di arata dem kwik-kwik* He killed the rats quickly. Fluidity of word class is typical: Krio *plenti* can function as an adjective in *plenti pikin* plenty of children, as a verb *Pikin plenti* There are plenty of children, as a noun *plenti pwel* Many are spoilt, and as an adverb *I get pikin plenti* He has children in plenty. (3) *Vocabulary*. The majority of words derive from English: body parts such as *han* (hand, arm), *fut* (foot, leg), common verbs such as *bi, get, go, kam, muf* (move), and auxiliaries *bin, de* (progressive), *kin, don* (perfective), *noba* (negative perfective). English elements occur in many loan translations, such as *dei klin* (day clean: dawn), *drai ai* (dry eye: brave). There are also words from African languages: *akara* (bean-cake, from Yoruba), *bundu* (camwood, from Mende), *jakato* (garden egg, from Wolof), *kola* (kola nut, from Temne), *nono* (buttermilk, from Mandinka). See AKU, GAMBIA, KAMTOK, SIERRA LEONE, VARIETY, WEST AFRICAN PIDGIN.

(From *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, 1992)

References

- Achebe, Chinua. 1965. "English and the African Writer". In *Transition* 18.
- Banjo, L. 1971. "Towards a Definition of standard Nigerian spoken English", in *Actes du 8e Congrès de la société Linguistique de l'Afrique occidentale*. Abidjan: Université d'Abidjan.
- Berry, J. 1961. "English loanwords in Sierra Leone Krio". In R. B. LePage, ed., *Creole Language Studies* 11. London: Macmillan.
- Fyle, C. 1975. "A National Languages Policy and the Teacher of English in Sierra Leone". In *Journal of Education* 10.2.
- Greenbaum, S., ed. 1977. *Acceptability in Language*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Jibril, M. 1982. "Nigerian English: an introduction". In J. Pride, ed., *New Englishes*. Massachusetts: Newbury House.
- Johnson, Alex. 1986. "Multilingualism and Language Policy in Sierra Leone". In *Bayreuth African Studies Series* 5.
- Jones, Eldred. 1971. "Krio: an English-based language of Sierra Leone". In J. Spencer, ed., *The English Language in West Africa*. London: Longman.
- Kachru, B. 1982. "Models for Non-native Englishes". In B. Kachru, ed., *The Other Tongue*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Pemagbi, J. 1989. "Still a Deficient Language?". In *English Today* 17, 5.1.
- Platt, J. et al. 1984. *The New Englishes*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Sey, K. 1973. *Ghanaian English*. London: Macmillan.
- Schmeid, J. 1991. *English in Africa*. New York: Longman.
- Stevens, P. 1982. "The Localized Forms of English". In B. Kachru, ed.
- Todd, Loreto. 1982. "English in Cameroon: education in a multilingual society". In J. Pride, ed., *New Englishes*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- West African Examinations Council regulations and Syllabuses for the Joint examinations for the School Certificate and the G.C.E. Ordinary Level and Advanced Level*. 1985. Lagos: Academy Press.